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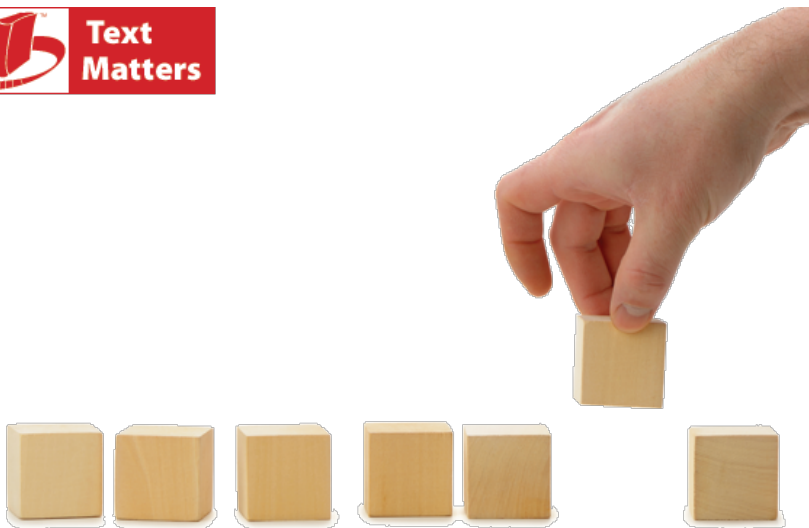
Text Matters

7 Actions that Teachers Can Take Right Now: Text Complexity

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A separate standard for text complexity in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) means that this feature of reading development is at the center of many conversations among educators. How this standard translates into classroom instruction is less clear. Even with current texts, teachers can take some important actions to support their students on the staircase of text complexity—right now!

With the introduction of CCSS, it's easy to think that text complexity is a new way to look at text. But this is not the case. It has been around for almost a century as part of readability formulas by governmental and educational agencies. It's just that text levels weren't explicitly identified. Statements were made that "students should recognize figurative language in a grade-level text" but grade level was never specified. The situation has changed with the CCSS. An entire standard is devoted to increases in students' ability to read complex text over the school years to the point of college and career readiness.

It should be noted that there are no clear paths for how this standard translates into classroom instruction. Compounding the issue is the text itself. Many teachers purchase books to read aloud or for special units but textbook purchases usually occur at the school or even district

Topics

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Text Complexity

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and state levels. There are also many questions about assumptions of the CCSS's construct of text complexity such as how far texts can be stretched before students' comprehension breaks down. Until researchers answer such questions and until educators and publishers determine how text complexity will be measured, most teachers have the texts that they have.
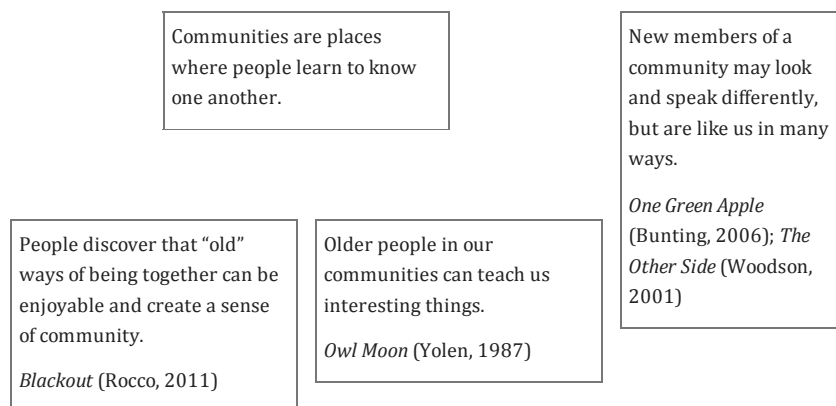
Action 1
Focus on Knowledge

The first action is to ensure that the focus of classrooms is on knowledge acquisition. The biggest reason why reading is so important is that texts are the place where human beings record their knowledge. Typically, the informational texts of content areas—biology, chemistry, physics, economics, geography mathematics, even the arts (e.g., music, art history)—are the ones that come to mind when we think of knowledge. It is true that the content areas are laden with new concepts and knowledge for students and that the critical role of content areas is recognized in the CCSS with its emphasis on informational texts.

But when teachers think of strengthening the knowledge of their students, they should also think of the knowledge within literature. The central themes of literature are the content of the humanities (philosophy, literary theory) and certain social sciences (history, psychology, anthropology). Literature deals with the human condition such as relations among human beings and that of the individual to society and nature. Literature has other features such authors' uses of language or features of genres. But the purpose of literature is to convey themes about the human experience—themes of survival, courage, family ties, and the joys and perils of growing up. Some text may not have the most profound themes—especially the texts of beginning reading but true literature, even in picture books, grapples with the great themes of human experience, as the individual's relationship to family, community, and even morality.

The first action that teachers can take to support students with complex text is to bring to the foreground the themes of literature, even in the primary grades. The content map below illustrates how several narrative texts that might be read-aloud to second graders or read as part of instructional and independent events by third graders relate to the theme of community connections and relationships.

A Knowledge Map for Narrative Texts

Communities are places where people learn to know one another.	New members of a community may look and speak differently, but are like us in many ways. *One Green Apple* (Bunting, 2006); *The Other Side* (Woodson, 2001)
People discover that "old" ways of being together can be enjoyable and create a sense of community. *Blackout* (Rocco, 2011)	Older people in our communities can teach us interesting things. *Owl Moon* (Yolen, 1987)

Action 2
Create Connections

For knowledge to be useful, new ideas and information need to be connected to existing knowledge. The integrated view of the language arts in the CCSS recognizes this need to reflect, share, and use knowledge.

The five terms represented in the acronym KNOWS are ways in which teachers support the connection of knowledge for students. First, teachers connect students' existing **knowledge** to the text at hand. In the extensions of the CCSS to guidelines for publishers, the CCSS writers minimize this role of the teacher and emphasize the text as the source of knowledge. But, for many students, a comment or question by the teacher about the text and how it connects to

students' knowledge can be critical (e.g., a few comments about World War II before reading Winston Churchill's speech Blood, Toil, Sweat, and Tears).

The second kind of connection—**new knowledge**—gives students a purpose and focus for reading. An anticipatory set on the role of speeches to inspire (e.g., Churchill's speech) can contribute to students' sense of why and what they are reading.

Support for **organizing** knowledge comes when teachers encourage students to write a response or make a concept map after reading. In a world with massive amounts of knowledge, learning to organize knowledge is one of the most enduring strategies of lifelong learning.

Connections to additional sources for learning **widen** students' webs of knowledge. Direction to the two other speeches that Churchill made as a new prime minister (and helped turn the tide of public sentiment in Britain) illustrates how teachers widen the web of knowledge.

Finally, teachers support connections of knowledge by giving students occasions to **share** what they have learned. The chance to share knowledge gained from reading, whether orally or in writing, underlies retention and ownership of knowledge.

Creating Connections: KNOWS

K	Did I draw on students' existing **knowledge** and experience?
N	Did I identify what **new knowledge** can be gained from this text and guide students in gaining it?
O	Did I support students in **organizing** their new knowledge with their existing knowledge/experiences?
W	Did I show students ways to **widen** their knowledge?
S	Did I support students in **sharing** their knowledge?

Action 3
Activate Students' Passion

Most American students can read but many don't like to read. This finding is sobering—and sad. In the 21st century, the world of knowledge represented by books is open to individuals as never before. According to researchers, an explanation for American students' disinterest in reading may stem from the fact that much of their school days are spent reading assigned texts. Further, reading events are often short with few connections from one event to another.

Students need the chance to delve into topics. They also need some choice in what they read. These choices, researchers have shown, do not have to be great. Even getting to choose between two books can go a long way in increasing students' engagement in reading. Teachers can do a great deal to engage students' passion and interest in reading by giving them the chance to read widely and deeply. The Funds of Information Initiative ("Funds") illustrates how this might happen. The Funds project has three components.

- First, appropriate books for students need to be identified for genres or topics such as the texts in the chart below. The categories are not comprehensive but the list illustrates books on often-overlooked topics (e.g., math, music).
- Second, Funds has only two guidelines: Students need to read a text from each of the designated categories and they need to read deeply—three books or more on a topic of their choice (including topics not on the list).
- Third, the sample record form for the Funds project illustrates that students' reading needs to be recognize. Forms can be more elaborate (e.g., symbols or explanations for likes or dislikes). What is critical is that students have a structure for reading widely and also deeply—and learning to access the wealth of information in books.

Sample Record Form

The Funds of Information Initiative

Stories About Heroes	Music
Tales: Old and New	Math
Animals in the Wild	History & Geography
How People Live	Your Choice

The Funds of Information Initiative
Identifying Appropriate Books for Selected Genres

Stories about Heroes	*Joan of Arc* (Diane Stanley) *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Rosemary L. Bray) *Seven Brave Women* (Betsy Hearne)

		• *She's Wearing a Dead Bird on Her Head!* (Kathryn Lasky)
Music		• *I Like Music* (Leah Komaiko) • *The Philharmonic Gets Dressed* (Karla Kuskin) • *Moses Goes to a Concert* (Isaac Millman)
Tales: New & Old		• *The Huckabuck Family and How They Raised Popcorn in Nebraska and Quit and Came Back* (Carl Sandburg) • *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* (Virginia Hamilton) • *Rapunzel* (Paul O. Zelinsky)
Math		• *Math Curse* (Jon Scieszka) • *Grandfather Tang's Story* (Ann Tompert) • *A Very Improbable Story: A Math Adventure* (Edward Einhorn)
Animals in the Wild		• *Manatee Blues* (Vet Volunteers series) (Laurie Halse Anderson) • *Animals and the Seasons* (Susanne Riha) • *Amazing X-Rays: Wild Animals* (Jacquelin A. Ball)
History & Geography		• *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* (Eleanor Coerr) • *The Scrambled States of America* (Laurie Keller) • *Shaka: King of the Zulus* (Diane Stanley)
How People Live	**Fashion**	• *I Want to Be a Fashion Designer* (Stephan Maze) • *My Wonderful World of Fashion: A Book for Drawing, Creating, and Dreaming* (Nina Chakarabarti) • *Frankly, Frannie: Fashion Frenzy* (AJ Stine)
	Sports	• *The World's Greatest Soccer Players* (Matt Doeden) • *The Wild Soccer Bunch: Kevin the Star Striker* (Joachim Masannek) • *A Beautiful Game: The World's Greatest Players and How Soccer Changed Their Lives* (Tom Watt)

Action 4
Develop Vocabulary

About 90% of the words in texts come from a small percentage of the words in English—about 4,000 word families (e.g., help, helped, helps, helping, helper). The other 10% of the words that make texts unique from a group of at least 300,000 words. The words in the 10% are different for narrative and informational texts. The unique words in narratives usually come from networks of words that students already know. Fourth-graders may not know the words *exasperated* or *irate* but they know *mad*. The unique words of informational texts—*convection*, *radiation*, *inflation rate*—often represent new concepts for students and are understood through inquiry, discussion, demonstration, reading, and writing extensively.

Teachers can find the unique words to teach in the content areas—they are clearly called out in glossaries and curriculum guides. Where there is more ambiguity as to what to teach are the words of narrative texts—the place where most vocabulary instruction occurs in the elementary grades. One author will use the word *incensed* and then *enraged*, while another author uses *furious*, *riled*, and *up in arms*. Students know the underlying ideas; they simply do not know the specific words.

It is the vocabulary instruction of the unique words of narratives that requires more direction, if students are to be prepared to read complex texts. All of the 300,000+ words can't be taught but what can be taught is an expectation for the kinds of words in narrative texts—a metacognitive stance. The Word Reminders form that is attached is in aid of such instruction. Another source for teachers to develop this disposition of word meaning families are the 32 lessons (one for each week of the year) at TextProject where "everyday words" have been taken and networks of words around them have been identified as the basis for quick, on-the-spot lessons for teachers.

Word Reminders™

Words You	Sometimes, a new word has a meaning close to that of a word you already know.

Already Know	
Words You Can Picture	Sometimes, a picture can help you remember a word's meaning.
Word Meaning Family	Often, the meaning of words are connected to the meanings of other words.
Word Part Family	Many words belong to families of words that have the same root words and meanings. Some root words are the same in English and Spanish.
Word Changes	Sometimes, the same word has several different meanings. Often, the meaning of a word changes when it is in a phrase or compound word.
Word Summary	Words are part of families or networks. When you learn the members of a word's family, your vocabulary grows.

Action 5
Increase the Volume

Most American students do not read a great deal. An often-heard response to this observation is "kids just don't read enough at home." True, students need to read more at home but, especially for students whose reading primarily occurs at school, models and interest in reading originate in the classroom. If students don't read much at school, they are unlikely to read much at home. In the typical classroom, students read less than 20% of the reading/

language arts block. Even a little more time can go a long way. An additional 7 minutes of reading per day has been found to be the difference in classrooms where students read well from those where students did less well. Taking on the **7-minute challenge**—where the goal is to increase the amount that students read daily by 7 minutes—can make a huge difference in students' knowledge acquisition and capacity for reading complex text.

The 7-minute challenge begins with solid baseline data on current reading habits. The "Eyes on the Text" form is useful for establishing a baseline and for tracking progress toward the goal of 7 additional minutes. Students in grades three and above can track their own data. The goal is not to simply accumulate more words. *What* students learn from their reading matters.

With students in grades 1–2, the teacher gathers the data. It is especially critical to keep information on students with different proficiency levels—low reader, medium reader, and high reader. For younger students, some of the reading can come from guided or scaffolded reading that is directed by the teacher. But remember that students only get good at reading independently if they read texts that engage them and that, simultaneously, are accessible.

And, remember: Habits don't change overnight. The goal is to steadily incorporate an additional 7 minutes (and even more) of reading into a classroom program. This does not happen in a single day or even week but over a month.

"Eyes on the Text" Form

Reading Sweeps Week: A Record of My Reading & Learning

What I Read	When I Read It	How Much I Read (in pages)	What I Learned (and plan to remember)

Summary

How many words I read this week

How long I read

My single longest reading event

Action 6
Build Up Stamina

The CCSS calls for students to think critically across extended texts and to extend their knowledge from one text to another. Reading across texts and reading long texts requires students to sustain their attention—a trait of reading that is called stamina. Many American students who fail to attain national standards (approximately two-thirds of a grade cohort) can read but they don't have the rigorous reading habits that are needed to read long texts and to remember what they have read in one source and transfer it to another.

"Academic emotions" are intertwined with students' willingness to pursue a task. When students think that they are not capable or anticipate failure in reading, their willingness to participate with a task is diminished. That makes entire sense. Most adults spend time on what they are good at and not as much time (if any) on things on which they are unsuccessful.

The challenge for teachers is how to increase levels of success. One feature of success is the ability of students to read the texts. When students aren't good at the core vocabulary, it is highly unlikely that they will be able to read many texts proficiently. This factor interacts with the other factors that we have described throughout this piece. For students who have experienced many years of failure, changing their interactions with the text won't be easy. But accessible texts is one of the means.

Teachers can also use the "Eyes on the Text" form to get a baseline as to how long students are reading at any one stretch (and how much text they are reading). Once baseline information has been gained, the amount that students are asked to read and the amount of time that students spend on reading can be steadily increased. Habits are not changed overnight. Steady and consistent is the name of the game when it comes to reading stamina.

"Eyes on the Text" Form

Reading Sweeps Week: A Record of My Reading & Learning

What I Read	When I Read It	How Much I Read (in pages)	What I Learned (and plan to remember)

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My single longest reading event

Action 7
Identify Benchmarks

The CCSS provided exemplars of complex texts at different levels. But no information accompanied the exemplars as to what made texts complex for students at particular grade bands (or even whether the exemplars fit into the quantitative levels set by the Standards). For teachers to understand how text features influence their students' reading, teams of teachers in schools need to identify exemplar or anchor texts in their school sites. Teachers learn about text features as they discuss with one another what makes one text challenging and another easier for particular groups of students to understand and remember. Identifying texts, as grade-level and school-wide teams, permits such discussion to happen. The texts that are labeled as "anchors" or benchmarks are not the ones that are used for instruction. Anchor texts are ones that are used to gauge the appropriateness of instructional texts for particular

students and tasks

The anchor texts below illustrate narrative texts that represent different points for second-grade readers. In primary grades where growth in reading is substantial, benchmark texts should be identified for different periods in the school year (e.g., trimesters or semesters). The chart that accompanies these anchor texts shows the criteria for why these texts were sorted the way that they are. These texts show features of knowledge, both conceptual and also word recognition, that is the focus of instruction over second grade. These texts also illustrate ones that are germane to a particular community of students—students in the inner city with a range of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic group. ⚑

Example of Anchor Narrative Texts for Second Grade

Grade 2.1	Grade 2.2	Grade 2.3
"Tell me a story," Ling says "Okay," Ting says. Once upon a time there were twin girls. They were named Ling and Ting. People saw them and said, you two are exactly the same." "Oh good" Ling says. "I know this story."	I have a dream about those shoes. Black high tops. Two white stripes. "Grandma, I want them." "There's no room for want around here, just need," Grandma says. "And what you need are new boots for winter."	Dear primo Carlitos, I live in a city. From my window I can see a bridge and cars zooming by. I can see skyscrapers, too. Skyscrapers are buildings so tall they tickle the clouds. At night all the lights from the city look like the stars from the sky.

Second Grade Narrative Texts Sorted by Curriculum Criteria

Level	Source	Title	Curriculum	
			Word Recognition	**Comprehension Strategies**
2.1	CCSS	*The Fire Cat* (Averill, 1960)	600 most-frequent words (and inflected endings) + less-frequent words with 1–3 letters	Follow story structure with a dilemma that is fairly common (e.g., a mischievous cat, twins who are different)
	High Recognition	*Frog and Toad Are Friends* (Lobel, 1970)		
	Contemporary	*Ling and Ting* (Lin, 2010)		
		Fly High, Fly Guy (Arnold, 2008)		
2.2	CCSS	*The Treasure* (Shulevitz, 1978)	1,000 most-frequent words (and inflected endings) + less-frequent words with 1–4 letters	Follow story structure where characters need to make choices (e.g., giving away shoes)
	High Recognition	*Henry & Mudge* (Rylant, 1987)		
	Contemporary	*Those Shoes* (Boelts, 2007)		
		Grandfather Counts (Cheng,		

		2003)		
2.3	CCSS	*Tops & Bottoms* (Stevens, 1995)	1,000 most-frequent words (and inflected endings) + less-frequent words with 1–5 letters	Understand that characters may be "playing" tricks (as in a fable); compare/contrast contexts
	High Recognition	*Good Luck, Ronald Morgan* (Giff, 1999)		
	Contemporary	*Dear Primo* (Tonatiuh, 2010)		
		Amazing Grace (Hoffman, 1991)		

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